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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 SINGAPORE 003001

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/18/2014

TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SN](#)

SUBJECT: SINGAPORE'S OPPOSITION

REF: 02 SINGAPORE 4218

Classified By: Amb. Franklin L. Lavin, Reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

1. (C) Summary and Comment: Singapore's political opposition is disunited, dispirited, and incapable of offering a credible alternative to the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). Along with the internal problems and institutional obstacles that have stunted its development, the opposition has also been consistently outmaneuvered by the PAP's pragmatism, which has made it difficult to develop a coherent ideological critique of its policies. There are few rewards for joining the opposition and the PAP has successfully co-opted some of its brightest critics. While the PAP has the ineffective opposition it wants, Singapore's sterile political culture has also robbed it of the risk-taking, creativity and entrepreneurship that the PAP recognizes Singapore will need if it is to continue to thrive. End Summary and Comment.

The Few, the Unhappy Few

2. (C) Singapore's political opposition is disunited, dispirited, and incapable of offering a credible alternative to the ruling People Action Party (PAP), which has utterly dominated the political scene for almost four decades. Along with a host of minor parties, there are four main opposition parties: the Workers' Party, the Singapore People's Party, the National Solidarity Party, and the Singapore Democratic Party. In the last general election in 2001, the opposition won 2 seats out of 84 and 25 percent of the popular vote in the districts it contested. In fact, in most of the multi-member electoral districts, the opposition didn't field any candidates at all. (Note: There are nine single member districts and 14 multi-member districts. End Note.) The opposition parties only contested 29 seats as part of a deliberate strategy of trying not to challenge the PAP's eventual victory. The logic was that more people would be willing to vote for a select few opposition candidates if they were assured that the PAP would still be in power.

3. (SBU) Opposition parties are small in size and have limited financial resources. For example, the Workers' Party has only about 500 members, according to its Chairman Sylvia Lim. It has no permanent staff and must rely on volunteers, who cover a variety of issues and don't have the depth to specialize. The party relies on dues (USD 2 per year), small donations, and the sale of its newspaper "The Hammer." Despite its name, the Workers' Party has limited contacts with Singapore's trade unions. The National Trades Union Congress is closely allied with the PAP. In fact, the NTUC website actually trumpets the "benefits of symbiotic ties" between the PAP and NTUC. In December 2002, a union affiliated with the NTUC sacked and expelled a branch chairman because he had taken a leadership position in an opposition party (reftel). Opposition parties have made little, if any, headway with other social organizations in Singapore.

Who Will Take Up the Challenge?

4. (C) The biggest challenge to the development of the opposition in Singapore is the PAP's highly successful track record. It has consistently delivered peace, stability, and rapid economic growth for four decades, while avoiding corruption and mainly avoiding cronyism. It maintains close contacts with all levels of Singapore society and seeks feedback -- on its terms -- on how government policies are working. Besides active constituency contacts by MPs and other politicians, the PAP and the government also rely on a very extensive grassroots intelligence network which provides "very complete, analytical and frank assessments of the public's thinking about government policies," according to a senior ethnic Malay leader. Even without the checks that a vibrant press or opposition would provide, the PAP has also been able to avoid the pitfalls of corruption, which would tarnish its reputation. Furthermore, in a small city state susceptible to external shocks and surrounded by much larger neighbors, few people are willing to trade the able and experienced hands of the PAP for the untested opposition.

5. (C) Given its bleak prospects, what makes someone join the opposition? Singapore People's Party MP Chiam See Tong observed that most members join because they have been hurt

by some PAP policy. Examples include people dissatisfied with the compensation awarded them for land expropriated by the government or those who have been forced to pay government fines. (Comment: The PAP is sometimes derisively said to stand for "Pay and Pay." End Comment.) Others, such as Sylvia Lim, find something intrinsically wrong with the PAP's domination of the political scene. Academics and opposition figures note that university students are hardly bastions of idealism or critical views, though. Most students are focused on launching their careers rather than on political protest. The opposition doesn't seek power and doesn't consider itself a credible alternative to the PAP. Its goal is to serve as a modest check on the PAP's power, to prevent corruption.

The Silent Treatment

16. (C) Limited coverage by the mass media, which carefully hews to the government line, frustrates opposition figures. The press occasionally runs an article noting opposition criticism of a government policy or an angry letter to the editor, but these are few and far between. (Comment: The docile press even draws the scorn of some members of the elite. One senior MFA official reportedly threatened to demote any official he found reading the Straits Times. End Comment.) Long time opposition stalwart Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam ("JBJ") told us that friends often ask him why he has been so quiet recently. He tells them he has been active, but the media just doesn't cover it. Due to this limited media coverage, the Workers' Party sends its volunteers door to door to meet voters and its one MP holds weekly sessions with his constituents.

Friendly Fire

17. (C) While the PAP is extremely disciplined and presents a common front to the outside, the opposition is divided and sometimes feckless. As one opposition MP noted, they have too many leaders and not enough followers. Some of the parties have authoritarian streaks and revolve around a single personality, several academics observed. At the same time, the media is eager to jump on the foibles and missteps of the opposition. Steve Chia, a young Non-Constituency MP (NMP) from the National Solidarity Party, was publicly embarrassed last December after his wife revealed that he had taken photographs of their maid topless.

18. (C) The PAP prevails by its pragmatism and ruthless pouncing on misstatements by opposition members by suing them for defamation. This tactic has forced several figures into bankruptcy and prevented them from running for public office. For example, during the 2001 election, opposition figure Dr. Chee Soon Juan followed then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong around at campaign events using a bullhorn to ask him about an alleged \$17 billion loan to Indonesia. The courts subsequently ruled he defamed Goh. Damages haven't been awarded yet as Chee has drawn out the judicial process -- he missed one hearing scheduled some six months in advance because he reportedly was visiting relatives in Taiwan.

Ideology? Not in Singapore

19. (SBU) A unique aspect of the Singapore political system is the almost complete absence of ideology. Seemingly controversial issues such as free trade, the death penalty, and military service are not issues here. Rational pragmatism reigns supreme and the PAP has done a masterful job of adopting any ideas or policies that it thinks will work for Singapore, even if the ideas come from the opposition. MP Chiam See Tong told us he spent years pushing for smaller class sizes in schools and longer compulsory education, which the PAP eventually adopted without attributing it to Chiam. This environment has made it difficult for the opposition to launch any sustained critiques of government policy and has created a parallel lack of ideology in the opposition itself.

Taboo Subjects

10. (C) Even though Singaporean society is an amalgam of Chinese, Malay and Indian groups, ethnic and religious cleavages have not been used to foment political activity. The PAP has worked hard to prevent this possibility from becoming a reality. Citing race riots in Singapore in the 1960's, the PAP has decreed any political discussion of race or religion to be out of bounds, or "OB" in Singapore's political parlance. For example, in August, PM Lee Hsien Long announced an easing of the requirement for police permits for indoor gatherings, unless they touched on sensitive issues such as race and religion. The PAP uses government housing policy to discourage the development of minority districts by setting racial quotas for each block of

apartments.

Stacking the Deck

11. (C) The PAP makes full use of the powers of incumbency to hamper the opposition. In 2001, it called a snap election with only 16 days notice and at the same time announced a new electoral map which had been extensively gerrymandered. The PAP has also consolidated most single member districts -- the opposition has had some success in the past in knocking off weak individual PAP candidates -- into five- or six-member Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs). (Note: Parties have to field teams of five or six candidates, which is much more difficult for the opposition. The PAP justifies the GRCs on the grounds that they promote minority participation in parliament since every GRC slate must include at least one ethnic Malay or Indian. End Note.) As noted above, the ruling party also keeps a close hold on the media and uses defamation suits to batter opposition members. The PAP uses an array of carrots and sticks for the voters. The PAP has offered subsidized housing upgrades to opposition wards that switched to the PAP and threatened to leave new subway stops in opposition districts closed.

If You Can't Beat Them ...

12. (C) The PAP has co-opted some of the government's best and brightest critics, using an array of scholarships, positions and sinecures at its disposal. For example, Raymond Lim founded the Roundtable, a civic policy discussion group. The PAP later recruited him to run for parliament in 2001 and he is now the Acting Second Minister for Finance and Second Minister of State for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. An opposition figure commented that the PAP's successful co-optation strategy has fomented mistrust in the opposition camp by causing them to suspect each other's motives. The PAP has also used Non-Constituency MPs (NMPs) to bring in fresh views and specialized talent into the parliament. (Note: NMPs are chosen by a special government committee, serve for two and a half years and have restricted voting rights. End Note.) The NMPs give representation to various social groups in Singapore and can critique government policies. They also have the effect of crowding out the elected opposition by taking on some of its legitimate role in the political process.

Creativity by Fiat

13. (C) Recognition is growing here that Singapore's continued economic competitiveness and prosperity will be hampered by its lack of risk-taking entrepreneurs and creative industries. At an intellectual level, the PAP recognizes this is a problem. It is unclear, however, if it will loosen its tight grip on the levers of economic and political control to create a more hospitable environment for creativity. On the one hand, PM Lee has publicly been exhorting Singaporeans to be more daring and to speak up. On the other, government officials express their disdain for the "messy" style of democracy in the West or Taiwan. At the same time, PM Lee has said the government will not subsidize start-up ventures (which have little access to venture capital much less bank financing), while the government investment holding company, Temasek, continues to use its vast financial resources to gobble up major Singaporean companies. (Note: Temasek is run by Ho Ching, wife of PM Lee. End Note.)

Comment

14. (C) In contrast to the PAP's phalanx of bright ministers and MPs, the opposition lacks dynamic figures adept at working the system or winning over public opinion. Opposition figures appear more interested in bemoaning their fate than planning how to build viable organizations. Furthermore, the opposition makes careless mistakes with the facts and uses tactics that backfire badly. There are undercurrents of dissatisfaction in Singaporean society -- such as among older workers concerned about job security. However, they haven't reached a critical level beyond the PAP's ability to handle or that the opposition could exploit.

15. (C) Without a charismatic leader to galvanize the opposition or a sustained economic slump that would shake people's trust in the PAP, the opposition is unlikely to make progress toward becoming a credible alternative. Entering opposition politics offers few rewards and many possible problems. One opposition figure compared Singapore to the movie The Matrix -- though everything looks fine on the surface, serious problems lurk beneath. The PAP has exactly the isolated and ineffective opposition that it wants. What the PAP fails to grasp, however, is that Singapore's lack of risk-taking and its dearth of creativity and entrepreneurship

are in fact the logical results of its sterile political culture.
LAVIN